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Historical-Theological Models of Pilgrimage as a resource for Faith Tourism

Jonathan M. Wooding

Abstract:

Pilgrimage is often seen as a physical journey to a sacred destination fixed by custom, destination-centred and broadly penitential in tone. The work of anthropologists in the last century broadened definitions to consider pilgrimage, across a range of faiths, in terms of a journey of transition and formation of identity. More recent historical scholarship has critiqued the longer development of our idea of pilgrimage, as well as its theological structures and markers. This diachronic approach to pilgrimage has also considered its origins with respect to early Christian conceptions of the life of the Christian in society and found resonances for patterns of lay pilgrimage in early monastic ideas. Such historical-theological dimension of research into pilgrimage provides a useful platform from which we can interrogate the idea of 'faith tourism' or 'pilgrimage tourism'. Many people of faith visit particular churches and holy sites to invoke their historic dimensions as well as to see what is presently on such sites. Visitors seek to re-enact historical narratives in the performance of certain pilgrimages and liturgies associated with them. Historical studies of theology thus may identify narratives that drive choices of action in pilgrimage. An historical reflection on pilgrimage may also be productive in widening definitions of pilgrimage for future development and may offer ideas for development of resources for the traveller.

Key words: historical pilgrimage

Introduction

The following discussion will briefly rehearse the evolving historical theology of Christian pilgrimage as an aid to reflection on the question of the 'pilgrimage experience'. My particular focus, appropriate to the workshop in which these papers originate, will turn upon the medieval Irish concepts of *peregrination* and *turas* which have particular value in helping us understand the development of narratives which drive faith tourism.

The traditional conception of 'pilgrimage' in the English-speaking world, as recently noted by Dietz, has tended to favour 'an organised journey to a particular holy place, the purpose of which is to be absolved of sins' (Dietz, 2005, 27; also Cohen 1992, 58-9). This is essentially the 'penitential' model of pilgrimage enshrined in works such as the *Canterbury Tales* and in the negative responses of Reformation critics (Wooding, 2009). The broader definition promoted by the influence of the

anthropologists Victor and Edith Turner (1978), of a journey of formation which turns on abandonment of previous identity, has allowed for a more inclusive, less destination-centred, model of pilgrimage which has inspired further recent reflection by historians with regard to origins (Bitton-Ashkelony, 2005; Dietz, 2005; Coleman and Eade, 2004, 10-11).

***Peregrinatio* as self-exile**

In the early church and the Early Middle Ages pilgrimage was defined by a number of terms. I will first of all focus one of the most common of these: *peregrinatio*. In Ireland there would be many people who are familiar with this as an historical term, as *peregrination* was used to describe the practice of self-exile by Irish monks, such as St Columba or St Brendan, which is one of the most visible aspects early Irish Christianity (Charles-Edwards, 1976; Wooding, 2000). The popularity of 'Celtic spirituality' as a modern movement has spawned a substantial tourist-centred literature and investment in interpretation of Celtic saints and pilgrimage (e.g. Jones 2001; CADW 2011). This makes the concept of *peregrination* of more than simply antiquarian interest.

Until well into the last century, study of the early Celtic *peregrinei* (those who went on *peregrinatio*) tended to be dominated by the belief that their roles were essentially evangelistic, owing to an assumption that Christianity had arrived relatively late in the Celtic world (Chadwick 1961) and because it was wrongly perceived that dedication of churches to saints was in some way linked to church-planting by the saints (Bowen 1969; cf. Chadwick 1954; Sharpe 2002). These assumptions are still unhelpfully reified in much interpretation literature; they tempt us to overlook basic facts about both the spirituality of Celtic monks and the nature of travel to churches and holy people— living or dead – by ordinary Christians. *Peregrinatio* does not mean evangelism, neither does it mean 'pilgrimage' in the most familiar modern sense. The broad classical meaning of *peregrinus* in antiquity was 'stranger'. When St Patrick (*fl.* 5th century), a Briton, describes his life among the Irish, he calls himself a *peregrinus* and speaks of 'my *peregrinatio*' (Patrick, *Confession* chs26 & 37; Herren, 1989; Brown, 1998). He had come to live as a stranger in Ireland, but also by his journey had made himself a stranger to his old life. Around a century later, the Irish monk St Columba of Iona sailed away from Ireland (*de Scotia peregrinaturus*) to make himself

a stranger to his homeland (Adomnán, *Life of St Columba* bk I, ch 7). For both men the act of entry onto *peregrination* was to mark a change of direction in their lives. Patrick's was not a uniquely Irish interpretation of *peregrinatio*. Paula (d. 404), a woman of senatorial family, widowed at age 32, left Rome to live in the Near East, spending a long period living with St Jerome in Bethlehem, where she founded monasteries and a guesthouse for pilgrims. Her *peregrinatio*, like Patrick's, was a decision to make a new life amongst foreigners. It is useful to note here that in the time of Paula and Patrick the broader model of pilgrimage had not fully developed into a journey to holy places. It tended to follow the Classical model of seeking to encounter wise *people* – a notion inherited from the ancient Greek idea of journeying to study with the leading philosophers. John Cassian (d. 435), who more than any other writer was to translate eastern monastic ideas for western use, spent time in Bethlehem but also in Egypt, in both places learning about the wisdom of monasticism. Paula herself indeed felt the need to counter the view that she was only living in a land cursed 'because it has drunk in the blood of the Lord'

... Everywhere we venerate the tombs of the martyrs; we apply their holy ashes to our eyes; we even touch them, if we may, with our lips. And yet some think that we should neglect the tomb in which the Lord Himself is buried ... In speaking thus we do not mean to deny that the kingdom of God is within us, (*Luke 17:21*) or to say that there are no holy men elsewhere; we merely assert in the strongest manner that those who stand first throughout the world are here gathered side by side. (Jerome Letter 46: Paula and Eustochium to Marcella, trans. P. Schaff, CCEL)

Such equivocality toward visiting places meant that it was by no means certain that pilgrimage would develop to become a journey *to somewhere* as its main aim. Going out to find God was important. Going to meet His saints was important. Going to the places where Christ lived, died and was resurrected was not yet as important – however strange that may now seem to us.

Strangers on the earth

In the Latin Bible, persons seeking God (Heb 11), like the earliest sons of Abraham are called to sacrifice the material things of life and become (Heb 11:13) 'strangers and pilgrims on Earth' (*peregriniethospites... supra terram*). For St Augustine of Hippo, *peregrinatio* indeed described the condition of simply being a Christian. The

Christian repudiated his or her earlier life, putting aside family and possessions to follow Christ (e.g. *City of God* bk I, ch 15; Claussen 1991). In doing so, while he or she might remain in their place of origin, the Christian becomes only a person 'passing through' the present world – no longer to own their material surroundings. In one of the earliest Christian epistles Mathetes, writing to Diogenetus, explains a similar position:

For the Christians are distinguished from other men neither by country, nor language, nor the customs which they observe...They dwell in their own countries, but simply as sojourners. As citizens, they share in all things with others, and yet endure all things as if foreigners. Every foreign land is to them as their native country, and every land of their birth as a land of strangers.
(trans. P. Schaff, CCEL)

This type of thinking changed as, with the increasing conversion of the empire, being a Christian became less of a mark of distinction. One term that tracks this transition in its history of usage is *paroikia*, a Greek term which meant a sojourn in a foreign land, which was sometimes translated *peregrinatio* in the Latin Bible. Later the term itself was borrowed into Latin to become a term to describe a community of Christians (*parochia*). In this way *paroikia* became a term for an ultimately static sense of being (giving us our English word 'parish'), though its origins were in the older idea that the Christian was really a traveller on the earth (Pullan 2007; Dunning 2009). *Peregrinatio* came to take its place as a word for an expression of faith in terms of an actual physical journey. *Peregrinatio* also came to take on distinctly monastic overtones from the late-Roman period. For the early Irish it came to describe a conception in which personal monastic vocation was expressed through travel – initially through monastic retreat within one's own nation and subsequently through removal abroad (Charles-Edwards, 1976). This changed with the gradual trend to favour the Rule of St Benedict (RB) as the normative western rule. Benedict was reluctant to see monks travel physically, though metaphorically he regarded monks as 'hastening to the heavenly home' (RB 73). The general influence of Benedict in western monasticism had the effect in time of widening the gap between travel to holy places and monasticism.

In the Middle Ages, *peregrinatio* retained something of the diversity of meaning that it had in the early church. Jonathan Riley-Smith has argued that secular participants on the First Crusades, who amongst other terms were described as *peregrini*, were seen by contemporaries to take on the some features of monastic identity, along with that of the more established 'Jerusalem pilgrim' (Riley-Smith 1976, 22-5, 150-1). Medieval monasticism in the Benedictine tradition mainly expressed the motif of life as a journey in a more static mode, but the reception of travellers and hospitality nonetheless did come to be a special aspect of Benedictine monasticism (RB 53, 56), as the traveller was placed by St Benedict alongside the poor as a person in whom 'Christ is received more specially'.

Patrick appears never to have been professed fully into the monastic life. Paula died a founder and head of monasteries, but both fit the late-Roman model in which the practices of holy men inspired people to separate themselves from their former lives. Their journey to a new country involved putting aside the family ties of their old life, which is itself an initial step in the monastic life. Someone like Paula viewed her life in phases of commitment to a place and a role. Having fulfilled her role in producing a family she saw her existence in terms of a new destination. Along with her daughter Eustochium and her friend Fabiola, her entry into the religious life was expressed at first as a journey of *peregrinatio* following widowhood.

Larger and smaller journeys

In the Irish tradition pilgrimage is seen in both wider and more local patterns, the latter described by the Irish (Gaelic) term *turas*. Most Irish people are familiar with *turas* as the performance of a 'round' performed clockwise (*deiseal*) around a holy site. The concept of *turas* is useful in considering the engagement of the pilgrim with the local landscape and church-sites. In traditional religious practices, the visitor to a church or holy site, such as a well or mountain, enacts a cyclical ritual of visiting a number of locations, or stations, around the site, which may each have their own ritual activity to be performed. These are not simply punitive rituals, though sometimes used as penances. The antiquity of *turas* is a contentious topic in Irish studies, but it is certainly established by the Middle Ages, if not earlier (Harbison, 1991, 51-4; Herity, 1995; O'Sullivan and Ó Carragáin, 2008, 316-32).

The *turas* is in essence a liturgical expression and reflects a liturgical narrative that is also found in other expressions of Irish pilgrimage. One of these is the monastic practice of travel that is epitomised in literary narratives such as the *Voyage of St Brendan* – a popular text in modern expressions of ‘Celtic’ spirituality. In this story Brendan and his monks set off on *peregrinatio* for a mystical destination, the ‘Land of Promise of the Saints’. This is clearly the Promised Land of Revelation (O’Loughlin 1999). The Land of Promise is only one destination, however, in a tale that is largely taken up with a seven-year voyage around the ocean, visiting the same islands each year on the major feasts of the year – including the famous celebration of Easter Saturday on the back of a giant fish. The story ends in something of an anti-climax with a brief visit to the Land of Promise – which is shown to be close to Ireland, but not to be further revealed to humanity until a future age. The message of this tale is that life is a cycle in which we know neither the hour nor the day in which the end will come and in which spiritual growth should be the main occupation – even the main purpose of journeying. The monks live each day and year in terms of a natural cycle which has no obvious beginning and end, but feast and fast alternately to celebrate, through the liturgy, a cycle centred on events in a lifetime: the events of the life, death (and resurrection) of Christ (O’Loughlin, 2000, 172-3; Wooding, 2003; Rumsey, 2007). The rituals are thus not to atone for sin, but something more positive: to maintain a balanced, regular, life while also to reflect on the fact that life still will end and is not a never-changing existence. The *turas* similarly reflects this idea of the immediate, cyclical, ritual, in the longer journey to the end. The *turas* is in essence a small, local, pilgrimage, but it captures in miniature liturgical structures we can often overlook in the larger patterns of pilgrimage.

Such reflections remind us that the journey of pilgrimage is not always immediately destination-centred. The monastic liturgy was a cyclical reflection on wider human existence – in which the secular person could share by way of the liturgy of pilgrimage. Myra Shackley conceives the modern pilgrim-tourist as enacting a ‘postmodern eschatology’, a journey in which the search may be for a variety of different destinations, some or all of which may assist the pilgrim to achieve the ‘mysterious’ and the ‘sublime’ in the midst of the ‘prosaic’ (Shackley, 2001, 192).

Life thresholds and modern pilgrimage tourism

The impression gained from sources such as the *Canterbury Tales* that pilgrimage was something of a form of tariffed accumulation of grace or discharge of sin, was one of the reasons why pilgrimage was condemned at the Reformation – as it was seen to be in conflict with the doctrine of justification by faith. As we have seen, however, pilgrimage could, in the light of the early church tradition, be expressed in journeys that provoke reflection at stages of transition in which the baggage of life is shed. Paula's *peregrinatio* was a 'rite of passage' into a different state of life. Paula was in our terms an 'empty nester' and traveller in the aftermath of bereavement. Modern *peregrini* might be now described as 'gap year', 'career break', 'detox', 'life laundry' or even 'green' travellers. These are people making a journey to reflect by withdrawal from their regular life, engaging in distinctive patterns of consumption that have resonances in modern tourism

It is briefly worth mentioning the trend in recent spirituality which is described as 'new monasticism', 'secular monasticism' or 'personal monasticism'. A range of recent expressions, which broadly use monastic models of living to resource secular life, variously draw upon the ideas of Deitrich Bonhöffer, Alasdair MacIntyre, and counter-cultural community movements of the late-twentieth century (Grimley and Wooding, 2010). The role of travel in the formal expressions of 'new monasticism' varies. One school, that takes its identity from the moral philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre's 1982 call for 'another – doubtless very different – St Benedict' (MacIntyre, 2007, 263), places the greater emphasis on community formation in society. Like the first St Benedict, this school appears to have had little to say so far on the value of physical pilgrimage (Wilson, 2010). Reflections on secular monasticism via Celtic texts, however, see great virtue in the escape from material life provided by pilgrimage, broadly reflecting the Turners' vision (Bradley, 1999; 2000, 197-244). These holistic, monastic-inspired, visions of retreat from normal material life thus promote an interest in pilgrimage to historic sites may demand our attention.

Practical questions

The foregoing critique of historical narratives of faith and formation/transition is offered here to contextualise other studies from different perspectives by critiquing the historical patterns of demand and consumption in 'pilgrimage tourism'. Coleman

and Eade (2004, 10) rightly question comparisons of past and present in terms of potential anachronism, yet also acknowledge that looking at the '*long durée*' reveals important patterns. How then do we use this type of historical-theological reflection in practical ways to enrich the 'pilgrimage' in the pilgrimage tourism experience'? Our concern here has been with what might be mainly termed 'faith' dimensions of pilgrimage. There can of course, with a notion as broad as pilgrimage, be a problem of defining when 'faith' really is at issue; we note the wider problem of separating ritual activities which can *resemble* religion from religion itself (Cox, 2004, 262-3; Bailey, 2007). We can identify what appear to be thresholds and points of reflection in pilgrimage, but these may be aspects of the life journey that already have an existence outside the faith context, even if they are also reflected in liturgy. Rather than this presenting a problem of inauthenticity, we should see this in terms of a distinction between the natural element in Christian theology, that which centres on natural cycles and patterns – which include living and dying in general – and the more specifically theological element which is expressed in the liturgical element that re-enacts the life, death (and resurrection) of Christ. This latter element is specifically linked to Christian faith, but much of the whole has meaning for those who are not Christian believers, inasmuch as it is about challenging the unchanging pattern of existence and living with different ends in view. The *peregrinus* we have seen is a pilgrim 'away' from everyday life, but still *toward* an end. This end is not always the traditional pilgrim destination, but often some more symbolic destination, which reflects the uncertainty of life.

Does broadening our understanding of the motives for pilgrimage help us identify more diverse experiences as 'the 'pilgrimage' in the pilgrimage tourism experience'? Do faith-neutral symbolisms segue into liturgical narratives in ways that we can subtly develop? Taking a longer view of pilgrimage there appears scope to do this. In terms of its monastic analogues, the pilgrimage can be seen as a journey of formation in different stages of life. Does this impact upon the services we seek to provide for the pilgrim-tourist, especially in the churches themselves? From a reflection on *turas* we learn that pilgrimage can be given depth by movement. The journey between sites is important; so too is the journey around the site, to its margins, and out into the wider religious landscape. Interpretation thus can be made through movement around a site, as well static installations. Insofar as liturgies are

re-enactments of Christian narratives, interpretation also can be performance – in some church traditions, indeed, the site itself *mainly* has significance through its use for performances, rather than much intrinsic value as a sacred structure. Another way to enhance the experience of the visitor is to incorporate a wider landscape in the interpretation of the pilgrimage site for the visitor. This can include placing interpretation installations in such a way as to encourage the visitor to walk to ‘stations’ on and around a site, encouraging reflection on histories of monastic use, landscape rituals and open-air evangelism (Wooding and Winton 2012).

Wiltshier (2011, 254) summarises the requirements of a ‘relational religious tourism’, arising from Shackley’s ‘postmodern eschatology’ model, as being ‘to relate consumption and sacred needs to the specific sites of worship as sacred places rather than as secular heritage sites’. If these ‘sacred needs’ are an essential element in ‘pilgrimage tourism’ we need to look at how we interpret the sacred aspects of the narratives that drive the pilgrim in terms of the ‘fit’ of our services. This can identify some potential disjunctions. How responsive for the pilgrim-tourist is, for example, an accommodation sector that focuses on the couple as a unit for accommodation? Much of our accommodation sector sees communal living as something only for the backpacker or itinerant worker – a matter of cost, rather than preference. Likewise, not all middle-aged tourists will prefer the restaurant meal over the self-cooked meal, and the private table to the communal. The pilgrim may want *something* of the communal element of meeting and eating of the ‘youth hostel’, but for company and for the religious resonances of the experience, rather than saving of cost. This is one example, but there will be many others.

The foregoing has considered a range of recent reflections on pilgrimages in historical-theological and anthropological studies. It has done so with the intent of identifying meanings and structures in pilgrimage that can help us respond dynamically to the consumer requirements of a distinct tourist demographic and to achieve depth in provision for such pilgrimage-tourists. Understanding the diversity of the concept of pilgrimage in these terms can, on the one hand, help us to respond to already inherent aspects of pilgrimage spirituality. It also, on the other hand, may see us respond more creatively in enhancing the pilgrimage experience in future developments.

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